STUDYING FOR TRUTH

A Basic Guide for Biblical Interpretation and Application in Personal Study



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1126 MINISTRIES

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Before You Begin

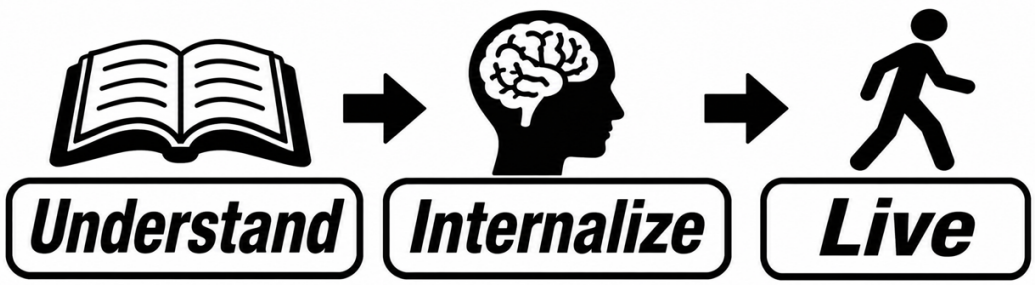
This guide is intended for the everyday Christian wanting to go deeper in their study of God's Word. This is only a process and not a magical formula for spiritual growth. While discipleship requires intentional effort and faithful obedience from the believer, our spiritual growth is ultimately dependent upon the gracious work of God within us. Discipleship is not meant to happen in isolation. You can study until you know Scripture forward and backward and still not be a follower of Christ. Even those who genuinely follow Christ can neglect the intentional practices and relationships through which they are called to grow. This guide is not meant to replace the life-giving work of walking with another believer as you sharpen one another and grow together in God's grace. This teaching is merely a tool and works best when it is used as a part of your growth within the context of a local church alongside other growing believers. I encourage you not to keep this to yourself, but to ask someone to walk through it with you. Together you can become disciples who make disciples!

-Pastor Brandon Pierce

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How We Study Matters

People often approach Bible study with the goal of acquiring information. It is how we are taught to read. They want to know what is in the Bible. They are interested in its stories and ideas. When studying Scripture, we are meant to receive more than mere information. We are seeking eternal truth. Information provides data points, but truth brings life. We do not disregard facts and figures. Rather, we use them to understand the meaning of Scripture and recognize the spiritual truths it communicates. The Bible is the divine revelation of God to mankind. Though it contains history, it is more than history. It is more than poetry or wisdom. Scripture is the inspired Word of God and is useful for the shaping of our lives to accurately reflect the character of God (2 Tim. 3:16). Simply put, if we desire to know Christ more deeply and serve Him more faithfully, we must not settle for information about God. We must seek to understand, internalize, and live according to the truth of His Word.



The proposed method of study in this guide establishes truth as the primary goal. When we seek to understand the truth revealed in Scripture, we gain an intimate and applicable knowledge of God and His works. As our understanding of God deepens, so does our relationship with Him, and we gain a proper foundation for applying His Word to our lives. If our goal is to know God more deeply and become more like Him, then how we study Scripture is just as important as what we study. As important as this process is, it is no replacement for the Holy Spirit, who is our teacher and enables us to both receive and discern spiritual truth (1 Cor. 2:12-14). It is the Spirit who guides us in all truth for the glory of Christ. Thus, we maintain a balance of zeal for studying and complete dependence upon the Lord to grant us the ability to learn from His Word.

To accomplish this, we approach Scripture with a willingness to learn rather than an assumption that we already understand. Instead of interpreting Scripture based on what we know to be cultural or contemporary truths, we allow Scripture to interpret itself, taking into account the original context of the passage and allowing its intended meaning to govern our application. We look to clearly presented

passages to help interpret the more difficult ones. We hold the teaching of a passage alongside the greater teaching of Scripture as a whole. This does not mean that each passage has an equal parallel elsewhere in the Bible, but means that one passage will not contradict other clear teaching presented in Scripture. To demonstrate the difference, we'll provide a simple example of how studying Scripture without the right questions can lead to an inadequate interpretation of the text.

A Practical Example

In Matthew 25:14-30, Jesus gives the parable of the talents. In this parable, a master entrusts three servants with different amounts of money before departing on a journey. Two servants invest the money, ensuring a return on their investment. The third hides the master's money because he feared the master. The master returns and blesses the servants who faithfully invested what they had been entrusted with and condemns the servant who buried his master's money.

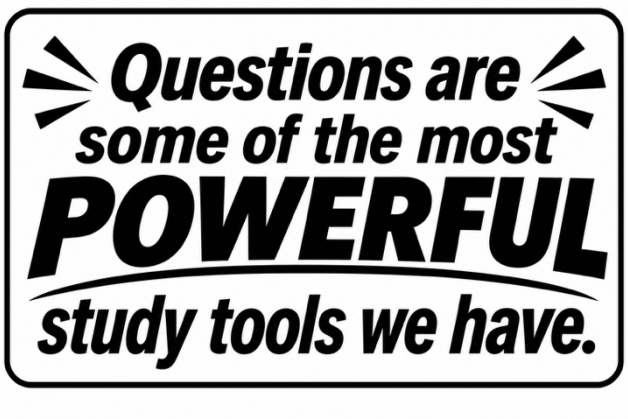
A person studying this passage simply to acquire information might conclude that Jesus is telling a story about servants who are either praised or condemned based on how they use what has been entrusted to them. The servants who faithfully invested what they had received were rewarded, while the servant who buried his master's money was condemned. An assessment of possible applications for this passage could look like: "Jesus wants us to be good stewards of what we are given" (This is true, but incomplete without considering the greater context...) or "Jesus gave us the parable of the talents because He - the Master - has given us all talents to be used for His glory. We should make sure we are using the talents He has given us, or He will be angry." (This interpretation sounds great at first but misses the entire reason Jesus shares this story.)

So, how do we get a proper understanding of this passage? What do we need to know in order to understand what Jesus wanted us to take away from this story? Understanding that the "talents" mentioned in the story are a sum of money immediately renders the above interpretation inadequate. It isn't sufficient to say that Jesus was teaching on using our gifts and abilities because the sums of money in the story are neither of those things. Further, it cannot be said that Jesus was teaching exclusively about the use of money because of the greater context of the passage. This parable is situated between two other passages addressing the return of Christ.

Matthew 25:1-13 contains the parable of the ten virgins, where some were ready for the bridegroom, and some were not. Jesus uses the parable to encourage His hearers to be prepared because they do not know the hour of His return, supporting His teaching from Matthew 24. The passage following the parable of the talents is one that describes Christ's return and provides yet more warnings to be prepared (Matt. 25:31-46). To understand the parable of the talents, we must take into consideration its context.



Because of the surrounding passages, it is reasonable to understand the parable in light of Christ's return. Because Jesus was addressing His disciples in private (Matt. 24:3), we know that this wasn't a generalized parable but an important truth they needed to understand. Jesus knew that the disciples would be entrusted with things of value in their ministry; offerings given, servants serving, etc. One of these most valuable things would be the very message of the gospel. Jesus is calling them to steward well all things entrusted to them. This includes not squandering the message of salvation through Christ by holding onto it for themselves, but investing it so that it yields an increase. This interpretation holds true to the greater message of Christ and His instructions to His disciples. Further, it is in line with the greater message of the New Testament.



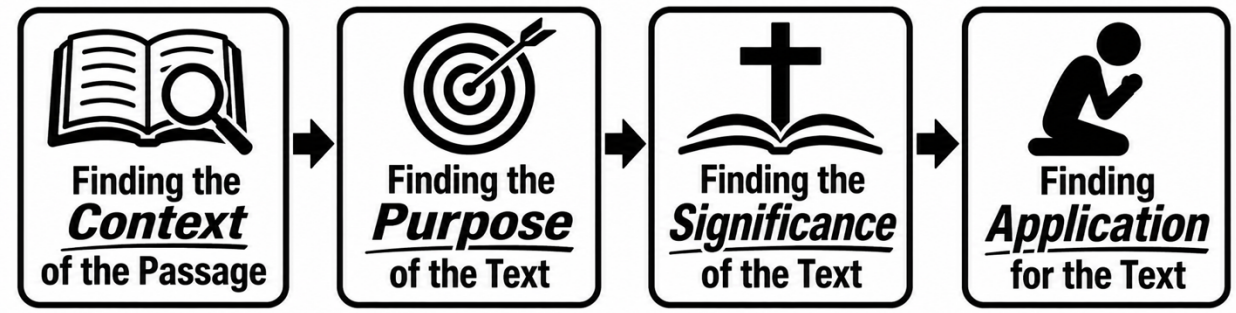
So, how did we arrive at this interpretation? One of the best ways to pursue understanding is to ask the right questions. Questions are some of the most powerful study tools we have. We must ensure that we are gaining a proper understanding of the passage so our application is in line with God's design for the text. To achieve this, we must first find the context of the passage, asking questions like, **"Who is writing this?"** or **"Who is speaking in this passage and to whom?"** and **"Who was this written to?"** Next, we must find the purpose of the text, asking questions like, **"What is the main idea of the text?"** and **"Does the text ask the reader to do something?"** After this, we must find the significance of the text, asking questions like, **"What does this passage reveal about God, His character, His purposes, or His relationship with mankind?"** Finally, after gathering all the information we can about the passage, we look for a proper application of the passage, asking questions like, **"How can I apply this text to my life in light of how the original audience would have applied it?"**

When we consider the application of this text, we must ask, "What does money entrusted to servants have to do with the return of our Master, Jesus?" Although the word talent refers to a monetary unit in this passage, its significance within the parable extends beyond the money itself to the

responsibility of faithfully managing what has been entrusted to the servant. This does not mean the passage speaks only to our money or valuable resources. Because of the greater context of Matthew 24-25 and the impending death of Christ in the following chapters, we must consider that this parable is speaking of all things entrusted to the believer, the most valuable of those being the message of the gospel. A proper application of the parable of the talents would be, “I must be sure to steward well what the Lord has entrusted to me, especially the gospel message, sharing it with others, investing it for a kingdom harvest so that I have something to present to the Lord when He returns.” This application not only aligns with the original text, but is also supported by the greater message of the New Testament that believers are to share the gospel with others.

To apply the parable of the talents to our lives, we must consider its interpretation. We cannot only say that this passage is calling us to use our talents for God’s kingdom. While this may be an accurate statement, it is not the only intention of the passage. It is an incomplete interpretation at best. God both gives gifts and talents to the believer and desires that they steward them well, but the general truthfulness of this statement does not mean it is the only thing read into the passage.

This is why asking questions is of vital importance in Bible study. Recognizing what a passage meant to its original audience must precede determining its application for today. The circumstances of our lives may differ greatly from those of the original audience, but scriptural truth remains authoritative. So, we seek to know what God wants to communicate to all believers through the passage. We do this by first finding the context of the passage, finding the purpose of the text, and finding the significance of the text before finally finding application for the text.



Should we have read this passage seeking whether God wanted us to use our special gifts and talents for Him, we could have easily affirmed that notion with no regard for what Jesus was actually saying. This process helps us to understand that, while God does want us to steward our gifts and talents, this is not the main idea of this passage. Using what has been entrusted to us faithfully and for the benefit of the Lord is a much more thorough and God-honoring idea than simply using our gifts and talents. Application must be rooted in the original intention of the passage and not our desired application or a tangential truth. Instead, interpretation must determine our application.

The Work of Prayer in Study

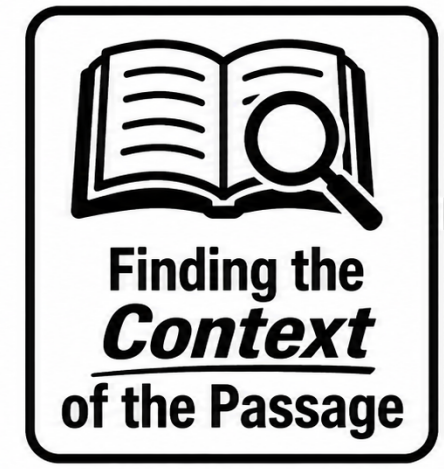
Enough cannot be said on the importance of prayer in this process. Prayer should be a part of preparation for study, a continual effort during study, and the driving force behind seeking application for a text. Begin by asking God to prepare your heart to receive His Word. Invite the Holy Spirit to direct your questions and thoughts as you study. As you come to difficult passages, ask God for help to understand them. As you prepare to apply God's Word, humbly submit yourself to the Lord and His Word, acknowledging that you desire His application for the text and not your own. Prayer is the work of communion with God. Is there a better way to fellowship with the Lord than to invite Him to speak and then open His Word and listen?

How to Use This Guide

The following are instructions for applying this process to your personal Bible study. A study template is included at the end that can be copied and used during your time of study. The process follows the path of finding the context of the passage, finding the purpose of the text, finding the significance of the text, and finally, finding application for the text. Each step contains a list of questions you can ask before, during, and after reading the text. You may use all of the questions, or only a few during your study, but they will help you uncover the spiritual truths taught in the book or passage you are reading.

1. Pray and read the entire passage. Read it more than once before consulting outside resources.
2. Identify the immediate context. Read what comes before and after the passage.
3. Work through the four steps. Record your observations and answers on the worksheet.
4. Consult reliable study resources. Use study Bibles, cross-references, and commentaries to test and deepen your understanding.
5. Summarize and respond. Write one sentence describing the passage's central meaning and identify a faithful response.

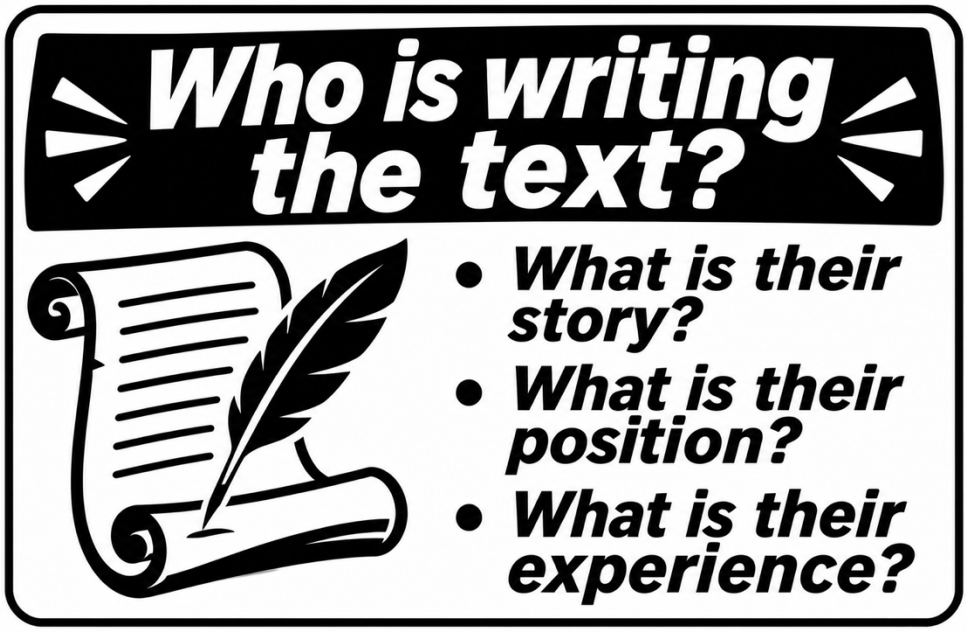
If at any point in your study, you uncover information that reshapes or adds to your earlier research, feel free to return to that step. This process constantly builds upon itself and you may find that you repeat a certain step several times before arriving at an application.



What Circumstances Help Me Understand This Passage?

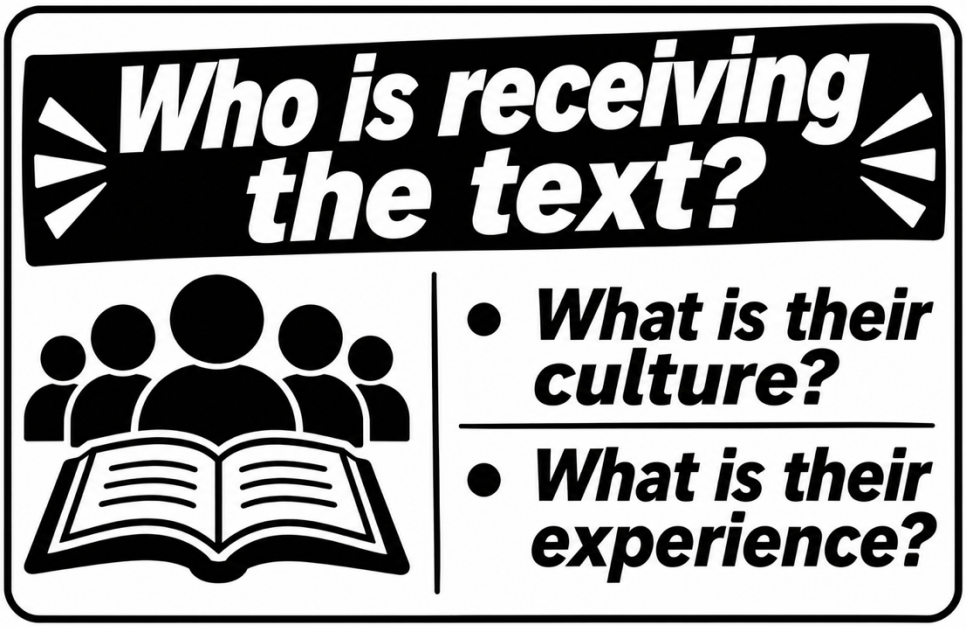
Before we can determine what a passage means, we must understand where it belongs. Who wrote it? Who first received it? What was happening at the time? How does this passage fit within the greater message of Scripture? Searching for the context of a passage can include reading the surrounding verses, chapters, and books, and even using commentaries and historical research. The depth of your study will depend on how thoroughly you investigate the passage. So, be sure to find quality, reliable sources for your study. Ensure that the authors of commentaries you utilize have sound theology and use reliable sources. Study Bibles also have notes that can be very useful in answering these questions. Historical records such as the works of Flavius Josephus (a first-century Jewish historian and military leader) can help provide information about the culture surrounding the events of the New Testament and early church.

Early church fathers such as Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp of Smyrna serve to provide insight into how the early church understood the Scriptures, while early Christian writers such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Justin Martyr can provide clarity on doctrinal issues and arguments of the first few centuries. While these writings can be a bit difficult to wade through for the growing believer beginning to dig into God's Word, it is beneficial to know where to look for reliable information. Start with Scripture. Use the resources available. (See the Recommended Resources section at the back.) Investigate historical resources when necessary. Use crowd-sourced resources such as Wikipedia and other popular information sources and search engines with caution. If eternal truth is our aim, we must be diligent to use quality sources to answer these questions:

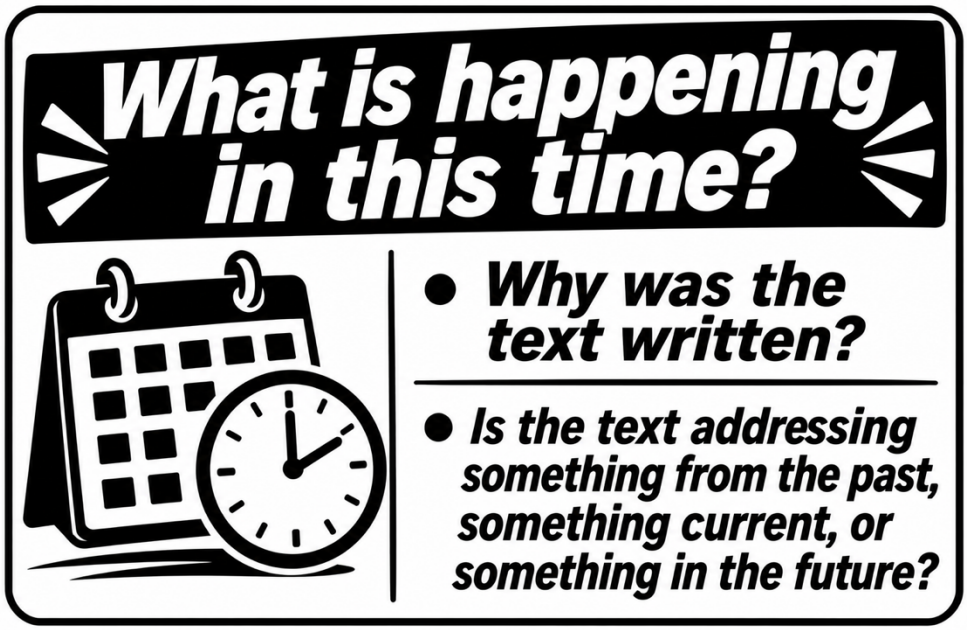


Knowing the source of the text is the key to interpreting things such as tone, attitude, etc. The gospel accounts are brought into a different light when you understand the viewpoints of the authors. Paul's letters of correction and encouragement receive additional weight when you understand his experience and calling. Old Testament passages recording prophecy reveal the glory and sovereignty of God in new depths when their authors' origins and circumstances are seen clearly. Scripture comes to life from a literary standpoint when we see God's gracious use of human men to reveal His glory through the inspired Word.

Next, we must consider who the text was written to. The author is only one part of the interpretive equation. Equally important is who the passage was intended for and how they would have received it. As given in our example, we know that the talent was a monetary unit of measure. The disciples and later, the first-century church, would not have believed that Jesus was referring to their practical gifts used for service in the parable of the talents. They knew that a talent was a sum of money and would have understood the parable accordingly. Better understanding the audience helps to ensure we do not create an interpretation based solely on an understanding of our own culture. These questions help us to begin to construct an interpretation:

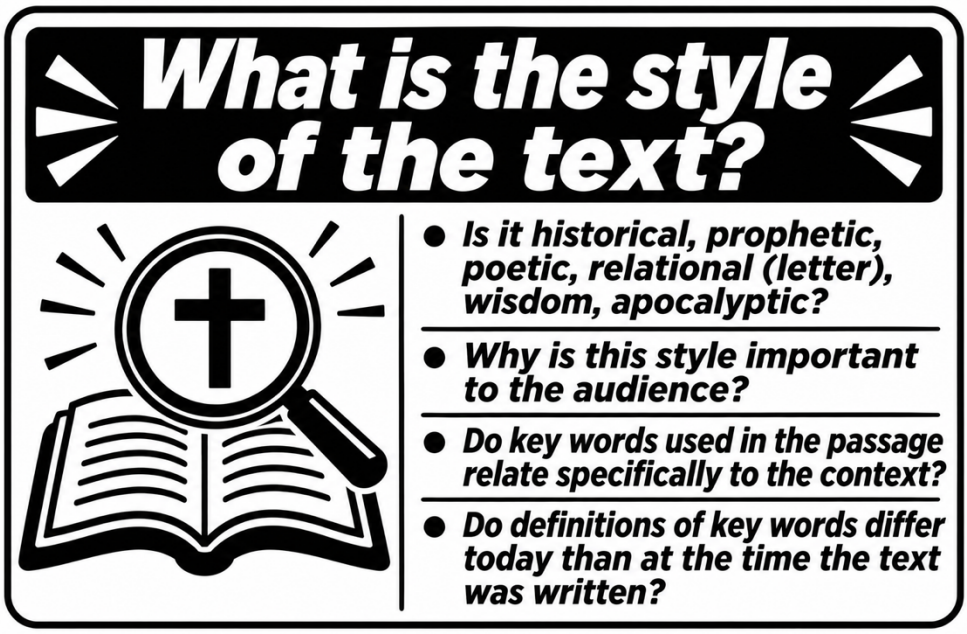


The author and recipients aren't the only contextual considerations to be made when studying a text. We must also determine what is happening historically during this time. Slavery is a topic that consistently brings controversy in modern Bible discussions. This is primarily because of atrocities committed during our recent history. The slave trade in recent centuries, coupled with the current reality of human trafficking, can cause the believer to read the word "slave" and immediately tie it to our cultural reality. Servitude in ancient Israel differed in important ways from slavery under the Roman Empire, and both differed from the transatlantic slave trade. These distinctions are important when interpreting biblical passages addressing slaves and masters. Scripture records and regulates forms of servitude within particular historical settings, and these passages must be understood in their original context rather than interpreted solely through modern cultural assumptions. Understanding those circumstances helps us distinguish between what Scripture describes, what it commands within a particular setting, and the broader moral principles revealed through its teaching. This greatly affects how we apply texts like Ephesians 6:5 and Colossians 3:22, where Paul exhorts slaves to obey their masters. In order to know what the author intends for the recipient to understand, we must seek to better understand the culture and events of the time in which the text was written. A modern cultural assumption should not determine our understanding of an ancient, biblical text. One path to gaining this understanding is to ask the following questions:



Finally, Scripture must also be considered as a literary work. The style of the writing has many implications for its context. Our example from Matthew 25:14-30 is a parable Jesus taught. The parable is a powerful teaching tool that connects the real experiences of a culture with significant truth that could be more or less clear, as determined by the teacher. Jesus often taught in parables to the confusion of those who were not privy to His later explanation. Parables are illustrative narratives rooted in reality. In contrast, fables, a beloved literary device of the Greeks, typically contained some fantastical element, such as the personification of animals who speak, and were clearly a fictional tale. When reading the teachings of Jesus, it is clear through his use of parables that He desired to instruct in more than mere philosophical ideologies, but in practical and eternal spiritual truths.

In another literary style, the Book of Daniel presents vivid prophetic visions with terrifying creatures that represent historical leaders and kingdoms on the earth. The prophetic style of Daniel should be taken into account when studying this text. The believer should not necessarily believe that a literal leopard with four wings and heads would be roaming the earth after reading Daniel 7. Rather, it can be understood that the beasts of Daniel's visions are symbolic and have a practical historical fulfillment. In contrast, the prophecies of Isaiah, Micah, Zechariah, and more point out specific events and details that are literally fulfilled in the first coming of Jesus. Isaiah prophesies in Isaiah 11:1 that "a shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse." For some, this may sound like nonsense. For those in the context of this writing, it would have been understood that this description of growth would indicate that a ruler would arise from the line of Jesse. This is a nuance of prophetic literature; it can contain both symbolic and literal language, and sometimes within the same passage. To help us determine how to handle the different literary styles we see in Scripture, we can ask the following questions:

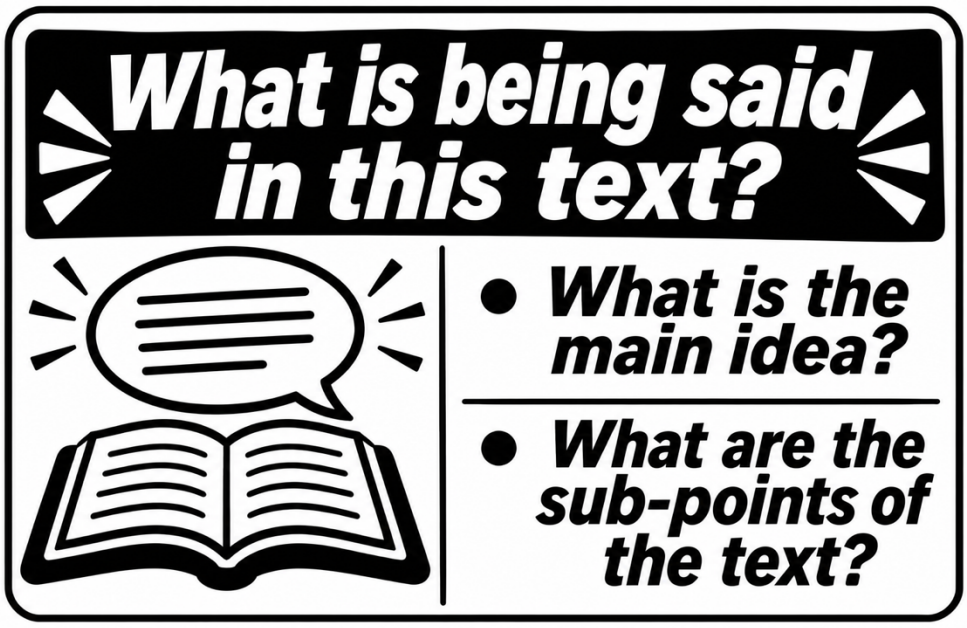


Upon answering these questions, we are ready to dig further into the passage. Answering these questions first enables us to have a good foundation for understanding the next step in the process: finding the purpose of the text.

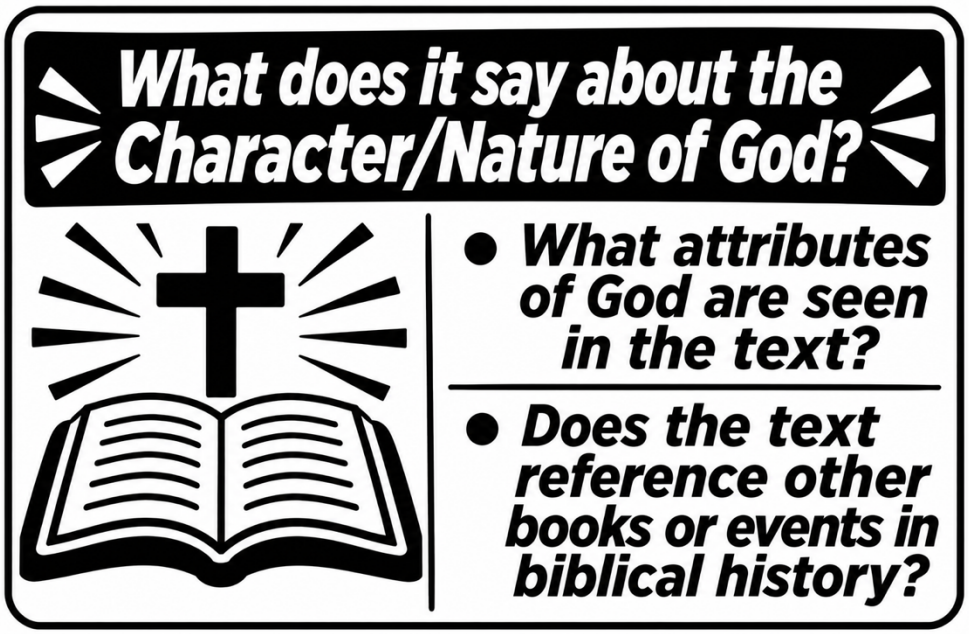


What is the Author Communicating and Why?

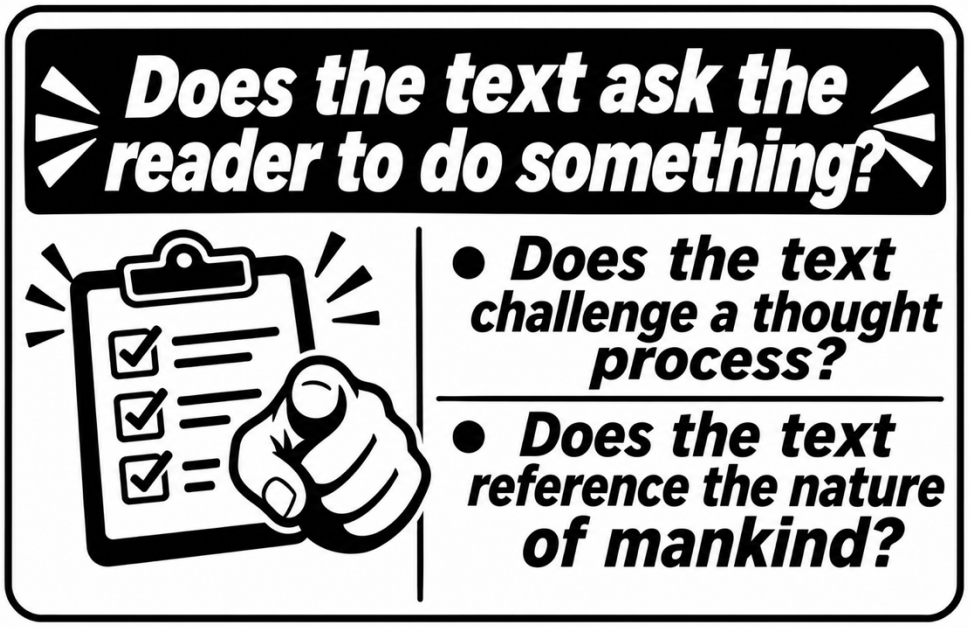
Once we understand the context, we seek to identify what the passage communicates. What is the central message? What does it reveal about God and mankind? What did the author intend the original audience to understand, believe, or do? This next step is really about taking inventory of the information presented in the text and begins with a thorough reading of the passage. This step may benefit from taking notes and creating bullet points for the ideas and facts presented. In our example from Matthew 25:14-30, we see that there is a master and three servants. Each servant is given a sum of money and the master leaves. Upon his return, he is pleased with the faithful servants and displeased with the one who buried the money out of fear. Sometimes this step is very simple; other times it requires more effort.



Diving deeper into the purpose of the text, we ask questions that begin to uncover what God intends to communicate to the reader. Often, a statement made about God in one passage is a clear reference to one made somewhere else. So, we look for those references, as the passage referred to may hold key points that further develop the revelation within that text.



After gleaning from the passage what it says about God, we then turn our attention to what it says about mankind. Only when we are confronted with how God views us can we truly begin to position ourselves to internalize the truth of Scripture. This step places Scripture as the authority for who we are meant to be and what we are meant to do with our lives. Armed with context and an understanding of what the passage teaches, we then submit ourselves to its intended purpose. We ask these questions as we seek to understand why it might be of spiritual importance to the reader.

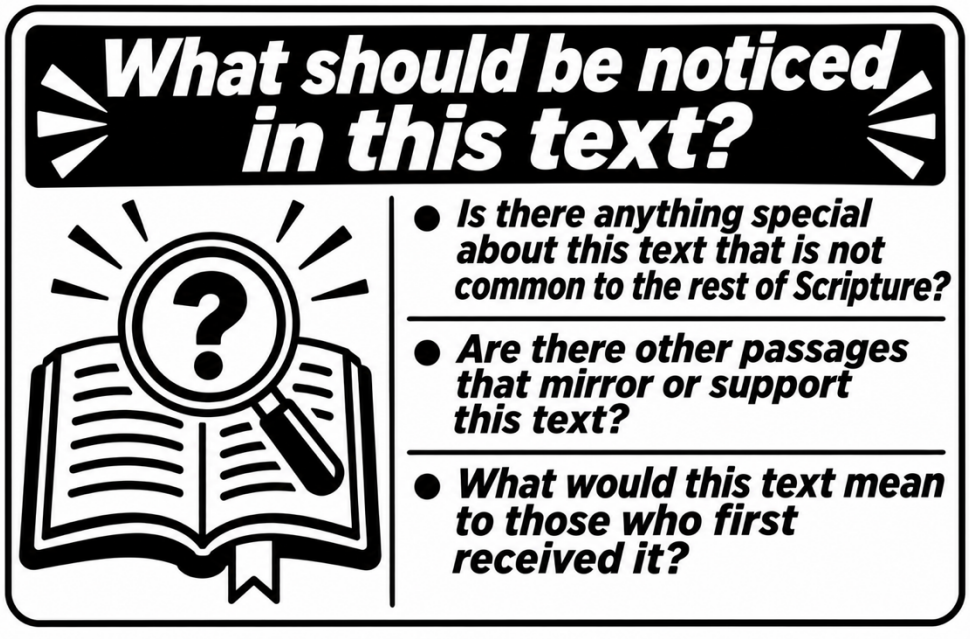


Understanding the purpose of a text is key to gaining a faithful application for it. Using our questions, we can uncover not only the “what” being communicated, but also the “why.” This allows us to proceed with our study confident that God will reveal why the text is important and what it is calling us to do.



Why Does This Message Matter Within Scripture and God's Redemptive Purposes?

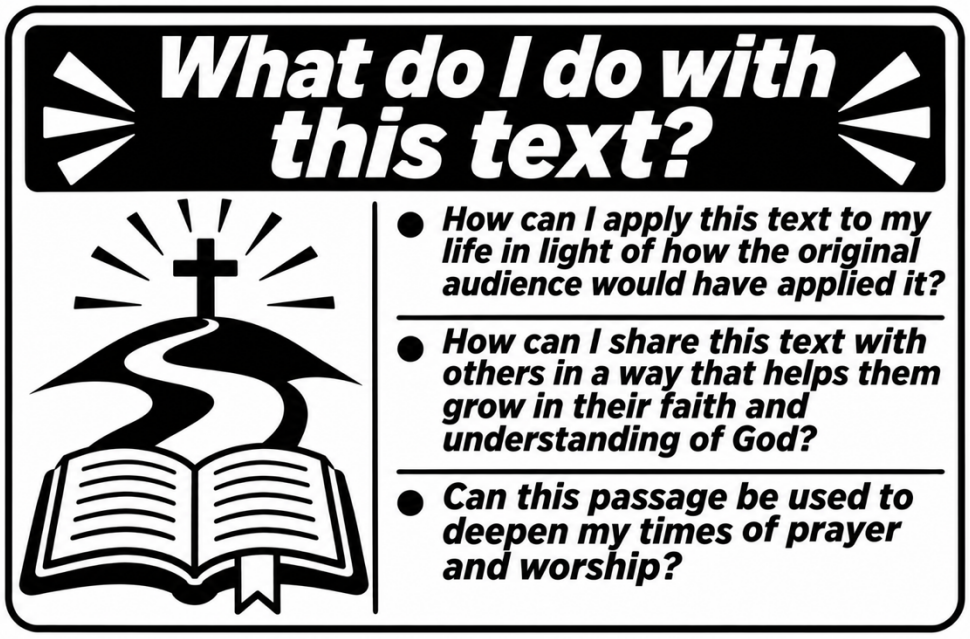
After we identify the passage's message, we consider why that message matters. How does it contribute to the teaching of Scripture as a whole? What important truths does it reveal about God's character, His purpose, and His work of redemption? The significance of a text is different from its purpose in that it centers on its unique place in the greater story of God's redemption of sinful mankind. Each passage bears great importance. Each verse plays its part in the grand design of God the Father to reveal Himself to His creation. The Bible is special revelation from God, meaning it is a specific and direct revelation of spiritual truths. Because of this, we would be wise to search deeply for these special truths about God. This does not mean we are searching for hidden codes in the text or treating each passage as an apocalyptic message. We simply study the text so that we see clearly what God has chosen to reveal to us. We should also understand that this special revelation was first given to others who wrote it down and presented it to its original audience. When we ask these questions, we should remember that context is everything!





How Should I Respond Faithfully to This Truth?

The last step of our process is finding application for the text. Here, we consider how the passage should shape our lives. What should we believe, change, obey, or remember? How should this truth influence our relationship with God and our relationship with others? There are certain passages whose application is obvious. When Paul encourages believers to pray about everything in Philippians 4:6, it is reasonable to apply this verse by praying about everything. But what do we do with laws given to the priests in Leviticus or instructions given to Israel as they prepared to march around Jericho in the Book of Joshua? While the new covenant believer may not be prohibited from wearing garments made from two different materials or commanded to march around a city seven times, we can understand concepts like approaching a holy God with humility and awe and obeying God, even when we might not understand what He is doing. Context is still everything, so we ask the following questions that help us to understand what a passage is calling us to.



While there are certainly many more questions that could be asked, these questions help to guide your study in a way that leads to accurate application of the biblical text. Regardless of your spiritual maturity or current level of scholarship, this process will help you to dive deeper into the eternal truths given through God's Word. As you grow, so will your questions. As your understanding grows, you will begin to recognize more clearly the depths of God's Word. I pray that your times of study in the Word are enriched by this process and that you are strengthened in your faith, love for the Lord and His Word, and your understanding of His will for your life. I am trusting God for His gracious provision for you as you seek to understand His Word, internalize it, and live it daily.

Attached is a worksheet that will allow you to answer these questions as you study your selected passage. There is a page for each step of the process. You can make copies of these pages or use them as a guide for recording your questions and answers in a journal.

FINDING THE CONTEXT OF THE PASSAGE

WHO WROTE IT, WHO RECEIVED IT, AND WHAT WAS HAPPENING?

01 CONTEXT | **02 PURPOSE** | **03 SIGNIFICANCE** | **04 APPLICATION**

PASSAGE: _____ DATE: _____

Who is writing the text?

- **What is their story?**

- **What is their position?**

- **What is their experience?**

Who is receiving the text?

- **What is their culture?**

- **What is their experience?**

What is happening in this time?

- **Why was the text written?**

- **Is the text addressing something from the past, something current, or something in the future?**

FINDING THE CONTEXT OF THE PASSAGE

HOW DOES THE FORM AND LANGUAGE SHAPE MEANING?

01 CONTEXT | **02 PURPOSE** | **03 SIGNIFICANCE** | **04 APPLICATION**

PASSAGE: _____ DATE: _____

What is the style of the text?

- **Is it historical, prophetic, poetic, relational (letter), wisdom, apocalyptic?**

- **Why is this style important to the audience?**

- **Do key words used in the passage relate specifically to the context?**

- **Do definitions of key words differ today than at the time the text was written?**

What is being said in this text?

- **What is the main idea?**

- **What are the sub-points of the text?**

PURPOSE & SIGNIFICANCE

WHAT IS THE TEXT COMMUNICATING, AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

PASSAGE: _____ DATE: _____

What does it say about the Character/Nature of God?

- **What attributes of God are seen in the text?**

- **Does the text reference other books or events in biblical history?**

Does the text ask the reader to do something?

- **Does the text challenge a thought process?**

- **Does the text reference the nature of mankind?**

What should be noticed in this text?

- **Is there anything special about this text that is not common to the rest of Scripture?**

- **Are there other passages that mirror or support this text?**

- **What would this text mean to those who first received it?**

FINDING APPLICATION FOR THE TEXT

UNDERSTAND → INTERNALIZE → LIVE

PASSAGE: _____ DATE: _____

What do I do with this text?

- **How can I apply this text to my life in light of how the original audience would have applied it?**

- **How can I share this text with others in a way that helps them grow in their faith and understanding of God?**

- **Can this passage be used to deepen my times of prayer and worship?**

Recommended Resources

CSB Study Bible from B&H Publishing Group – Great readability and helpful study notes.

ESV Study Bible from Crossway – Extensive study notes, cross-references, and theological articles.

Blue Letter Bible.org – Website and app providing multiple Bible translations, commentaries, devotionals, and study materials.

Bible Gateway – Web app containing multiple Bible translations, commentaries, and study materials.

Relight Reformed Theology & Bible Study Web App - Collection of free Bibles and Commentaries.

The Gospel Coalition Commentary from The Gospel Coalition – Free Bible Commentary and teachings on Scripture.

Enduring Word Bible Commentary from David Guzik – Verse-by-verse and chapter-by-chapter commentary that is balanced and free digitally through several platforms.

As always, use caution and discernment when assessing resources. No single resource is infallible, as it is limited by human understanding. Not every view or position expressed in the above resources is endorsed by 1126 Ministries.

About 1126 Ministries

1126 Ministries exists to edify and exhort the body of Christ through discipleship ministry while growing the church through evangelization. Our mission is to provide teaching ministry that emphasizes a transformational following of Christ according to His Word, making disciples who become purposeful disciple makers. For more information and resources, visit: www.1126ministries.org.